

Heckler offers defense of anti-abortion stance

Associated Press

NEW HAVEN, Conn. — Secretary of Health and Human Services Margaret M. Heckler yesterday defended her opposition to abortion and answered skeptics of her feminist leadership.

"There are those who call themselves feminists who, because I also respect the life of the unborn, believe I am not suited to serve as a women's leader," she told 700 alumnae, faculty and students at Albertus Magnus College.

"Those very leaders do not take cognizance of the fact that so many abortions take place of little girls because families had wanted boys," she said at the inauguration of her alma mater's 12th president.

Heckler, class of 1953, stressed that in the work place, at least, American women should realize "our choice is our own."

One of three women holding cabinet-level posts, the former eight-term Republican congresswoman from Massachusetts said that "there will come a day when the dream of becoming president will be a little girl's dream."

She also announced she has chosen Albertus Magnus as the repository for her public papers from 16 years in Congress.

The secretary said the nation has "seen a quiet revolution in terms of women's place, and in a strange way the Albertus Magnus faculty have been among the dialecticians of the women's revolution."

"There was no women's movement when I attended Albertus Magnus," she said.

Induction of Sister Julia M. McNamara as president of the 58-year-old Catholic women's college, brought politicians and educators to the leafy grounds of the 550-student campus.

Yale University President A. Bartlett Giamatti delivered the inaugural address, stressing the value of independent educational institutions and the pursuit of an open mind through liberal education.

At a luncheon following the inauguration, Heckler talked about her undergraduate days when she was campaigning for the Connecticut Intercollegiate Student Legislature.

"How does one campaign on every college campus in Connecticut in 1952 and live within the then-existing curfew?" she asked.

Even worse, she said, were restrictions she faced as the only woman in Boston College law school's graduating class of 1956.

"The acceptance of women was not a foregone conclusion in the '50s," said Heckler. "Many law firms had an invisible sign: 'No Women Need Apply.' It was that period in my life that made me a feminist."

But this does not put Heckler at odds with the Reagan administration, she said.

"I once asked President Reagan, 'Do you realize this week is National Secretary's Week?' He replied: 'Yes I do, but [Secretary of State] George Schultz refuses to wear my corsage.'"

"This is not a president that stereotypes women," she said.

Though the gender gap is evident in statistics, "the media focus has emphasized its importance," Heckler said.

"If evidence of the president's genuine respect for women becomes understood ... the American people will be thoughtful enough to elect him."

She added that she assumed Reagan would seek re-election.